

1766: The Real del Monte miners' strike

A short history of the first ever strike in North American history, by Mexican silver miners.

In the summer of 1766 Mexican silver miners of Real del Monte, about one hundred kilometres north of Mexico city, developed a major industrial strike without a trade union or a political ideology to sustain them. It was the first strike in the history of Mexican labour and the first strike in North America

The word “huelga” which means strike did not get included in Spanish dictionaries until 1884 and the workers of Real del Monte never used it. Their efforts represented struggles that involved working, living and being disappointed. They demanded rights that had been marked only in sweat and tears. They won their rights by organisation and negotiations that were innovated spontaneously but confirmed officially. Their way was made possible by the counsel and actions of friendly people with status in the town.

It is possible to tell the story of this great strike principally because at the height of the conflict notaries of the colonial government of New Spain interviewed and recorded the views and attitudes of all parties involved - both management and workers. Underneath the torrent of abuse directed at workers about “rioting” the reality of a different form of collective protest is evident. This was a strike.

The events of 1766 are not a precedent simply because they involved a work stoppage - this had occurred many times before - such as at Guanajuato where miners walked out over taxes on tobacco and over the expulsion of the Jesuits. No, what the miners of Real del Monte did was stop work in order to change their labour contract. Their agitation was about the nature of the work itself and although the strike had knock-on effects on all other aspects of their lives, its origin and nature was distinctive. This was a struggle by workers, fighting as workers.

Silver mining in late eighteenth century New Spain was a fully developed industry, with great capital investment, division of labour, deployment of a large workforce and systematic work practices. The market for silver was an international export market, to Spain. It was controlled by the crown. And yet each enterprise was separate from each other, with different customs, traditions and rules, bound together only by royal patronage. And so it was at the Real del Monte mine which was owned by the greatest magnate in New Spain, Pedro Romero de Terreros, later said to be the richest man in the colony.

Production at the silver mines was geared towards making the quota of ore-laden rock containing silver and other valuable minerals. For the workers there was the added incentive of the partido, any extra ore over the quota which they could sell themselves. The basic unit in the labour process was the barra or work gang of five or six men- pikemen, peons and the gang captain. While the pikemen attacked the rock face with explosives and mallets, peons carried sacks up precarious ladders. The miners worked 12 hour shifts because of the shortage of labour. Legally the crown authorities allowed the use of forced “Indian” labour and, unusually, at Real del Monte, African slave labour. Racism was not a significant issue in this dispute however. The mine owners were also allowed to organise a recogedores, a private army which rounded up extra workers and terrorised existing workers should they disobey or dissent.

Straining beneath long hours, dangerous conditions and persistent coercion, the miners were welded together by common experience, shared feelings and aspirations and when the spark was lit, a knowledge of their own collective power.

The strike started after Pedro Romero de Terreros tried to cut costs and increase profits. This followed enormous expenditure on draining water from and rehabilitating one of the seams in the mine. In June 1765, peons' wages were cut from 4 reales per shift to 3. Sacks became larger, making it impossible to meet the quota and the partido. The traditional process of dividing the partido was changed. Bags of ore, of both quota and partido, were "mixed" so that workers received less of the high quality ore in their partido. The partido was the only thing enabling the workers to keep body and soul intact.

In July 1766 management started renting (instead of loaning) partido sacks. They increased the quota and undertook the process of "mixing" behind closed doors. Even more of the high quality ore went to the owner. The charity sack - traditionally a voluntary contribution to two local convents (as a hospital and burial provision) - had become compulsory and much larger.

The workers' action began when a barra of pikemen met secretly on 28 July 1766. They persuaded a scribe to draft a petition, on the advice of their priest. They got 70 signatures and presented their grievances to the officials of the royal treasury at Pachuca. Upon their return to Real de Monte, management set the recogedores on them. Several were forced to work an extra night in dry diggings.

By 30 July workers and their families were converging on Pachuca. Only 10 barras had reported for work. The strike had begun. On 1 August a new petition had been drafted and a mass meeting decided that it should be sent to the highest authority in the land, the Viceroy of New Spain, in Mexico City. The new petition was eloquently sore against the "mixing" and the loss of partido. It stood for four reales for peons, against the mineowner's violence and the use of scabs. It squarely blamed Terreros, not the foremen for the trouble, and demanded a fair share of the profits for 1200 men.

Four of the central strike leaders were arrested on 8 August. Terreros himself intervened on 14 August agreeing to the central demand for an equitable partido. By 15 August it appeared that all but a few pikemen, still complaining about recogedores and the pay of their peon comrades, had returned to work.

But Terreros reneged on his agreement, setting the recogedores on the workers at the end of their shift. He was lucky to escape with his life. Only the intervention of the priest saved him in the riot that followed on the night of the 15th. Both the district manager and a foreman were stoned to death in Real del Monte. For the next few days, four thousand armed men, women and children roamed the area, settling old scores as once again the mines stopped working. The jails too were sprung and the four hostages released.

By the time an emissary from the Viceroy, Francisco de Gamboa, arrived on 27 August, Terreros was in hiding and the strike was still solid. Gamboa was the greatest authority on mining in the New World and until 13 September conducted a consultation with all the workers, foremen and management, all except Terreros who refused to participate. Gamboa worked out a solution most favourable to the workers. Gamboa's Ordinances as it became known was carefully observed by both the Spanish authorities and mine owners for the next ten years.

At Real del Monte, antagonistic administrators were dismissed by Gamboa, the partido was maintained (with a public mixing of the ores), peons continued to receive 4 reales per shift and sacks were standardised.

The workers' strike was a success. Even workers who left Real del Monte were not blacklisted in different parts of the country. Of course those who stayed continued to mine silver in great quantities and through their labour made Pedro Romero de Terreros the richest capitalist in New Spain.

This strike is a remarkable story for two reasons. First, the rough behaviour of the mine owner and managers toward the workers parallels that in Mexico, and elsewhere in the developing capitalist world, today. The use of thuggery, intimidation and the refusal to listen to the workers' demands. Second, the struggle of workers - though they work in modern factories and not the primitive conditions of the silver mine - is very similar. The struggle is to gain a decent wage, enough of a subsistence to have a life worth living.

The lessons of this strike should not be lost on socialists today. There are many new workers' movements and struggles in the world today. Our task is to help turn these new struggles into victories. To do that we need to keep old traditions of working class solidarity alive.

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